

NCA

VOC FOR IOP/FH

POLITICAL FEATURE 1-1436

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A SOVIET PILOT DEFECTS

VOICE:

JUST A WEEK AGO -- ON SEPTEMBER SIXTH -- A TWENTY-NINE YEAR-OLD SOVIET PILOT LANDED A TOP-SECRET MIG-TWENTY-FIVE JET FIGHTER AT A SMALL JAPANESE AIRPORT SOME SEVEN HUNDRED KILOMETERS NORTH OF TOKYO AND ASKED FOR POLITICAL ASYLUM IN THE UNITED STATES. THE INCIDENT HAS SPARKED A LIVELY DISCUSSION AMONG U.S. JOURNALISTS AS VOA'S JULIAN GORSKI REPORTS:

NARR:

THE REASON FOR THE INTEREST SHOWN IN THE DEFECTION OF LIEUTENANT VIKTOR IVANOVICH BELENKO IS MANIFOLD. IT TOUCHES ON MILITARY, POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS. FROM THE MILITARY STANDPOINT, AMERICAN REPORTERS POINT OUT THAT THE AIRCRAFT IS ONE OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED WEAPONS IN THE SOVIET ARSENAL AND ONE WHICH WAS NEVER SEEN CLOSELY BY WESTERN EXPERTS EVEN THOUGH IT APPEARED IN THE SKIES DURING THE NINETEEN SIXTY-SEVEN AND SEVENTY-THREE MIDEAST CONFLICTS. IT IS GENERALLY ACCEPTED TO BE THE WORLD'S FASTEST AND HIGHEST FLYING FIGHTER PLANE CAPABLE OF REACHING SPEEDS MORE THAN THREE AND A HALF TIMES THAT OF SOUND AND AN ALTITUDE OF TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND METERS. BUT PERHAPS EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE MIG-TWENTY-FIVE IS BELIEVED TO HAVE THE MOST ADVANCED RADAR AND ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT AND THE VERSATILITY OF SERVING ALSO AS AN INTERCEPTOR-RECONNAISSANCE PLANE.

AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA ALSO POINT TO SOME OF THE OTHER INTERESTING ASPECTS SURROUNDING THE BELENKO DEFECTION. THEY NOTE THAT HERE IS A YOUNG, HIGHLY-TRAINED SOVIET OFFICER, A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY, WHO PEELED OFF FROM A FORMATION

OF PLANES SIMILAR TO HIS AND ELUDED BEING FORCED DOWN. SO MUCH FOR HIS ABILITY TO MANEUVER THE PLANE. BUT HOW ABOUT HIS LANDING ON THE ISLE OF HOKKAIDO? THERE ARE NO FIRM REPORTS ON HOW HE ACCOMPLISHED THAT FEAT. SOME PAPERS CREDIT HIM WITH MANAGING TO AVOID JAPANESE INTERCEPTORS AFTER HE WAS SPOTTED ON A RADARSCOPE ... OTHERS CLAIM THAT HE CAUGHT THE JAPANESE DEFENSES BY SURPRISE AND WASN'T NOTICED UNTIL HIS PLANE CAME SCREAMING DOWN THE RUNWAY. BE THAT AS IT MAY, WE NOW COME TO WHAT MANY JOURNALISTS CONSIDER PERHAPS THE MOST FASCINATING ANGLE OF THE STORY. AS THE NEW YORK TIMES NOTES, THE TWENTY-NINE YEAR OLD FLYER WAS A MEMBER OF ONE OF THE SOVIET UNION'S MOST TRUSTED CADRES ... HE WAS NOT A DISGRUNTED INTELLECTUAL ... NOT AN ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN OR ANDREI SAKHAROV, BUT A POLITICALLY-INDOCTRINATED AIR FORCE MAN. AND THIS MAN TOLD JAPANESE AUTHORITIES THAT HIS WAS A PLANNED FLIGHT. HE HAD, HE SAID, BEEN LONGING FOR FREEDOM IN THE UNITED STATES. THEN HE ADDED: "LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION HAS NOT CHANGED FROM THAT EXISTING IN THE DAYS OF CZARIST RUSSIA WHEN THERE HAD BEEN NO FREEDOM."

PRESIDENT FORD PERSONALLY HAS DECIDED TO GRANT LIEUTENANT BELENKO'S WISH AND THE YOUNG PILOT IS NOW ON AMERICAN SOIL.

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